Rescue at Sea

By Hill Goodspeed

From top, three of the aviators who flew with Hammann pose in the back row: Pete Parker, third from left; Dudley Voorhees, fourth from right; and George Ludlow, far right. Center, a Macchi M.5 flying boat rests on the ground in Italy. Bottom, Charles Hammann flew his Macchi M.5 in a daring rescue following a pamphlet-dropping mission over Austria. Photos courtesy the National Museum of Naval Aviation.

When the United States entered WW I, patriotic fervor and the inherent adventure of flying prompted scores of young men to join up in hopes of winning their wings of gold. Among them was a 25-year-old Marylander named Charles Haseltine Hammann.

A native of Baltimore, Hammann joined the Navy on 27 October 1917 as a "landsman for quartermaster." He had already completed ground school training and was sent overseas almost immediately, arriving in France in early 1918 for flight training. After follow-on instruction in the nuances of Italian flying boats at Lake Bolsena, Italy, Hammann became one of many U.S. pilots assigned to fly foreign aircraft overseas. He received orders to the newly opened NAS Porto Corsini, Italy, positioned in a strategic location only 64 miles across the Adriatic Sea from the Austrian naval base at Pola.

The American flyers were eager to strike a blow against the Austrians, but their hosts seemed content not to take any offensive action, probably because the base defenses consisted of eight forts and batteries containing 114 antiaircraft guns. Under the command of the Italian Director of Marine Aviation, the Yanks had little choice but to comply. Even without combat, the 100-foot-wide canal used for takeoffs and landings provided plenty of excitement in day-to-day operations. Additionally, just because the Italians weren't offensive minded didn't mean the Austrians followed suit—more than once bombing attacks sent personnel scurrying for dugouts as near misses sprouted geysers in the canal waters. Prohibited from retaliating, the only "ordnance" American fliers could drop initially was propaganda leaflets. Although outwardly this mission seemed not the least bit dangerous, the Austrians had announced their intention to execute as a spy anyone caught engaged in it.

On the morning of 21 August 1918, "Haze" Hammann manned one of five Macchi M.5s tasked with escorting two M.8 bombers carrying bundles of papers for the first leaflet-dropping mission over Pola. The

single-seat flying boat with machine guns in the nose was an unlikely fighter, particularly when compared to landplanes then in operation. The sortie against Pola was barely underway when engine trouble forced one of the bombers and a fighter to return to base.

Approaching the Austrian naval bastion from the south in order to avoid the heavily defended mouth of the harbor, the four remaining M.5s climbed to 12,000 feet, flying high cover for the lone bomber, which could only reach an altitude of 8,000 feet. The sight of leaflets tumbling over the side of the M.8 prompted some Austrian gunners to open fire, but of more immediate concern was the launching of enemy aircraft—two seaplanes and five land-based fighters. The seaplanes never attacked, but the shore-based fighters quickly reached altitude, divided into two sections and eyed their prey.

The quartet of Naval Aviators in their M.5s wasted no time in taking the offensive to protect their charge. Using their altitude advantage, the flying boats pounced upon the Austrians, blazing away with their machine guns. The first pass caused the enemy planes to scatter, but dwindled the number of operable Macchis as jammed machine guns forced Pete Parker and Dudley Voorhees out of the fray. This left George Ludlow and Hammann to engage the five fighters, now regrouped and smarting for revenge.

The pair fought valiantly, with Ludlow sending one of the Austrians down smoking. However, the firepower of the enemy eventually overwhelmed the pair: the bow of Hammann's aircraft was shredded by machine gun fire, and Ludlow's machine suffered hits in the propeller and engine, igniting oil. Fortunately, he managed to right his spinning, flaming aircraft and land in the water five miles off the entrance to Pola Harbor.

Observing his comrade's plight from above, Hammann couldn't have been encouraged. Even undamaged, his plane would have had a difficult time landing and taking off in the choppy seas, and there was no guarantee his damaged bow would hold up. In addition, even if he were to get to Ludlow, his Macchi M.5 was a single-seater. Finally, a rescue in the enemy's backyard brought the possibility of strafing by hostile planes. Despite the odds, Hammann, an avid card player, trusted his gambler's instincts and pointed his plane downward.

As Hammann landed, Ludlow took measures to sink his own plane and board that of his rescuer. Without a seat, he took position under the aircraft's engine, grasping the wing struts with all his might. Despite the waves smashing against the already damaged nose, Hammann nursed his aircraft into the air and, after machine gunning Ludlow's aircraft to ensure its sinking, headed for home. Luckily, no Austrian aircraft appeared.

Arriving over Porto Corsini, Hammann successfully negotiated the tricky canal landing approach, but once on the water the plane that had served him so well finally succumbed. The nose gave way, allowing water to flood the aircraft and causing it to sink. Hammann and Ludlow were retrieved by boat, having sustained only cuts and bruises.

The immediate reward for the pair of fliers was leave. "Was hurt on August 21st after a scrap with 5 Austrian planes, therefore the sick leave," was all the unassuming Hammann wrote in a letter to friends in Baltimore. The lasting reward came later, when Hammann, now promoted to ensign, received his nation's highest award for valor, the Medal of Honor. He was the first Naval Aviator to be so distinguished.

Tragically, he would have little time to bask in the glory. On 24 June 1919, while flying as part of a demonstration by Army and Navy aircraft over Langley Field, Va., Hammann's plane suddenly went into a tailspin and crashed into the ground, pinning the war hero under the wreckage and killing him. Ironically, the aircraft in which he was flying was a Macchi M.5.

Just 10 days short of the 21st anniversary of Hammann's heroic flight, the Navy commissioned *Hammann* (DD 412), whose short history would be akin to that of her namesake. During WW II she took on survivors from *Lexington* (CV 2) during the Battle of the Coral Sea and picked up crewmen from *Yorktown* (CV 5) when that carrier was torpedoed during the Battle of Midway. On 6 June 1942, while alongside *Yorktown* supporting damage control measures in an attempt to save the ship, Hammann was sunk by a torpedo from a Japanese submarine. A second *Hammann* (DE 131), a destroyer escort, joined the fleet in May 1943 and served throughout the remainder of WW II. Fittingly, while serving as a convoy escort on 2 May 1945, she rescued 70 survivors after a torpedo attack on a merchant ship and sent salvage parties aboard to help keep her afloat.

In the air and on the sea, the name Hammann represented both warrior and savior.

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